

Watergate big fish have sentences cut

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica ended his long involvement in the Watergate case Tuesday by drastically reducing the sentences of the biggest fish netted in the scandal.

He reduced the 2½-year to 8-year sentences to John N. Mitchell, H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman to a period of "not less than one nor more than four years."

Ehrlichman, who went to prison without waiting for the outcome of his appeals, thus becomes eligible for parole from his Watergate cover-up conviction after Oct. 28.

He still is under a 20-month to five-year sentence for his conviction in the so-called Watergate plumbers case but

it was expected that the judge in that case would reduce the time to conform with that handed out by Sirica. For Haldeman the magic date is June 21 next year and for Mitchell, June 22.

Sirica made his decision after hearing tape recorded requests for leniency by the three men, and eloquent pleas by their lawyers.

Sirica was chief judge of the U.S. District court in the District of Columbia when the seven Watergate burglars were indicted on Sept. 15, 1972. He assigned himself to hear their trial and that began an involvement that ended only Tuesday.

"I'm glad it's the last major decision I'll have to render in this case," he told a reporter before entering court. "It's a

long, difficult case, in many respects a sad case. I'm glad to see the end of the tunnel."

There are no more Watergate prosecutions pending and it is expected that Sirica will soon voluntarily take the title of senior judge, which will free him from day-to-day courtroom responsibilities. He is 73.

Mitchell, Haldeman and Ehrlichman were convicted of conspiring to cover up White House involvement in the Watergate scandal and of lying about it afterward. They fought their conviction and sentences up to the Supreme Court without success and there were no

judicial remedies remaining other than Sirica's action.

If Sirica had failed to reduce their sentences their only other recourse would have been intervention by President Carter.

Ehrlichman, 52, formerly domestic counselor to Richard Nixon when he was president, has been in the federal prison camp at Safford, Ariz., since last Oct. 28. Mitchell, 64, who was Nixon's attorney general, went into prison at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama on June 22 and Haldeman, the Nixon chief of staff, entered the prison facility at Lompoc, Calif., the day before.